

Action Research in the Convergence of Disciplines*

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Introductory words

I wish to begin by a personal revelation and a respectful request. Last May 18, at the splendid closing session of the World Congress on Action-Research, held at the Universidad de La Salle in Bogotá, delegates from Australia, Great Britain and the United States informed the audience that I had just been awarded one of the most prized honors of the world of social sciences: the Malinowski Award, of the Society for Applied Anthropology, and that I had been chosen as the Martin Diskin Oxfam America Commemorative Conference Speaker of LASA, Latin American Studies Association.

It was unusual in that those decisions were taken concomitantly. They were as two sparks that fell at one time on a single lightning rod. You may believe me that one of them alone would have been enough to burn me to ashes, so much the more taking into account that both citations referred equally to the origin and dissemination of Participatory Action Research

* Editor's note:

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Translation: Luís Marcos Sander

(PAR), taking distance from the first psycho-social school of Kurt Lewin. This was now a more complex level of academic, social and political participation. Even so, they were inviting me to remember and explain the story of a process of continuity and dissent in the accumulation of scientific knowledge, a process that certainly deserved such great international recognition.

My first concern was how to share this task between the Society of Applied Anthropology and LASA. As you know it was interrupted by a severe illness that would have prevented me from having the pleasure of seeing you in person and shaking your hands at Montreal. I began to decide how I would have done it in my young years as a doctoral student: apply division of labour pragmatically. For LASA, because of the interesting Diskin tradition with “activist researchers” in Central America, I could use a more cognitive and descriptive treatment of experiences in field work, which would make me doubly happy and very satisfied, because it fitted in with that important work by Diskin in El Salvador. For the Society of Applied Anthropology and its venerable journal *Human Organization*, I would present an interpretative digression on the possibly phenomenological experience, with a view to exploring the possibilities of an alternative paradigm. This is therefore what I am doing.

Forgive me if this unexpected double task becomes somewhat repetitive, because I will try to harmonise both works. But I fear that, in future, these reports will have to be consulted complementarily. I hope thus to fulfill the expectations of both institutions, and to receive your indulgence, my colleagues and friends of LASA, to begin the debate here in Spanish.

I feel very moved and honoured to have been selected as the Martin Diskin Oxfam America Commemorative Conference Speaker of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA), and I extend my heartfelt thanks to Mrs. Diskin, who is present here, and to the distinguished Evaluation Committee, coordinated by Brinton Lykes, which made the decision, as well as the Board of Directors of the Association. Very special thanks to Professors Milagros Pereyra, Charlie Hale, María Claudia Duque and Arturo Escobar for their encouragement and support. Also to Professor Kevin Yelvington, who had the kindness and energy to propose and document my name before the authorities. I appreciate the presence of so many Colombians in this room,

and of my families, Fals and Samper: I feel the warmth of my country and my people in these cold, although welcoming plains of dynamic Quebec. Thank you, thank you all very much.

And now I will present the thesis on the functions of PAR (Participatory Action-Research) in the convergence of disciplines, as an interesting expression of postmodernity.

Beginnings and convergences

Let us remember how my colleagues and I, from Third World countries, began to articulate our thinking and action in the 1970s, combining, as we said, heart and mind to propose techniques and procedures that would satisfy our anxieties as citizens and as social scientists.

We were sociologists, anthropologists, economists, theologians, artists, farmers, educators and social workers. Thus, it was a diverse, complex group, some of whose members had decided to abandon the university routines and dedicate themselves to alternative research. In India, the peasant group of Bhumi-Sena (Army of the Earth) was flourishing, with its organic intellectuals, Da Silva, Wignaraja, Rahman and others; in Brazil, Paulo Freire (1970) and Darcy Ribeiro confronted the military dictatorship and fed the “conscientisation”; in Mexico, Rodolfo Stavenhagen (1971) was putting into practice his celebrated article on “decolonising the social sciences”; in Tanzania, Marja Swantz was opening up avenues for popular studies to the local talent; and in Colombia, Father Camilo Torres, Maria Cristina Salazar and other colleagues were establishing the bases of “community action”, and preached the nationalist line with topics of struggle against large landownership and for human rights, as well as seeking the historical roots of peoples. Many of these pioneers came from teaching and were popular educators who found technical complementation in PAR (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991). This feeling-thinking contingent was later joined by teachers and unionists from advanced countries, such as John Elliott and Peter Reason (2000) in England, Stephen Kemmis and Robin McTaggart (2000) in Australia with the aboriginals, and Myles Horton in the Appalachians in Tennessee with groups of impoverished miners (Horton & Freyre, 1990).

The interdisciplinary activity began to become stronger and there were marginal, sometimes unexpected approaches. For instance, in addition to educators, agronomists and veterinarians arrived. They were the first to seek and apply action research techniques such as rural sociology, until this was finally incorporated to the academic programmes. With the periodical regional and world congresses, physicians, dentists, and nurses, social economists and engineers approached. More recently convergences occurred with history, literature and music. Among the mathematicians, in 2002, with these contacts, a new inter-discipline arose: ethno-mathematics, whose main concern was to improve teaching schemes to render them less frightening to young people (Valero & Skovmose, 2002).

Besides the convergences mentioned, the idea of “participation” was also assimilated to replace that of “development”, which had been failing, since it began in 1949, as demonstrated in outstanding studies (Escobar, 1995). There were clear failures with a context of Northern origin for this. The World Bank thus created its own participatory team, and imposed pertinent conditions in its contracts with governments. PAR was also extended to United Nations agencies.

Strategic tensions

How did these disciplinary and institutional convergences that explain the current expansion of PAR worldwide take place? It appears to me that here an important role was played by the sense of commitment to the popular classes, and the guiding effect of the philosophy of life that was being developed in PAR. Values and attitudes were important at the meetings. There one shared what, essentially, constitutes the heart of the participatory action methodology, which we call “strategic tensions”, as a set of situations derived from the attempt to apply the classical concept of “praxis”, to which, heretically, were added ethical elements, as I shall explain further on.

Three such tensions were determined, under the heading, which is currently more widely used, of “praxeology”: 1) between theory and practice; 2) between the subject and object of research; and 3) between the world view and the value orientation or philosophy of life.

1. Theory and practice

This theme was the one that raised most problems among the disciplines involved. Beginning with established, rather closed, deductive or linear paradigms: such as René Descartes' positivism, the mechanicism of Isaac Newton and the functionalism of Talcott Parsons, when using them we did not want to see any a priori hypothesis, nor any pre-established practice. We advised using a slow rhythm of reflection and action which would allow making adjustments along the path of transformations that we saw as needed, with the participation of the base actors. Thus we began to glimpse possible alternative or emerging paradigms.

Like Diskin, we did not like pure and simple activism, but thought it should be guided by clear ethical-political principles. With the interdisciplinary colleagues, it helped us to appeal to useful but forgotten concepts of the Aristotelian school, such as that of "phronesis", or "good judgment" that we saw could moderate the Hegelian or Marxist praxis. Praxis cum phronesis, *telesis* or purpose (Fals Borda, 1979) became the minimum desirable ethical framework of the staff and investigators in the field. This also applies to the application of the different disciplines that seek social change, an idea that is close to the concept of "transforming praxis", according to the recent study by Lykes and Coquillon (2007).

Another problem of this theoretical-practical tension came from the usual rules regarding the validity of results. If they were limited to measuring internal consistency based on statistical factors or attributes, one fell into a self-objectivity, which we did not share. Thus other criteria of validity were developed, that depended directly on results in the field, and on the perception of local groups of reference, besides several steps of participation, intervention or insertion into the real processes (Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

Without the stimulation provided by this tension, we would not have been able to establish the possibilities of a new participatory holistic paradigm, as I will explain in greater detail in the complementary presentation that I mentioned in the beginning. We were helped by reading postmodern philosophers such as Bateson with holism (1972), Gadamer and Checkland about open systems (1960), Lorenz with Chaos theory and Boaventura de Sousa Santos about reconstruction of democracy (2003). Obviously, there are others.

2. Subject and object

In the first stage of PAR we were as careful as the mathematicians in not extending the positivistic or dualistic distinction between subject and object, which can best be done in the natural sciences, to the social domain. Especially in learning and in pedagogy, it was counterproductive to consider the researcher and the researched, the teacher and their students, or the specialist and their clients, as discordant or antagonistic poles. Rather, we wanted to consider them both as people connected to each other by feelings, rules and attitudes, with diverse opinions and experiences that could be taken into account in the projects, jointly. To solve this tension and achieve a subject to subject relationship that would be horizontal or symmetrical, it was imperative for individuals to respect and appreciate the contributions of the others. The key role of the young people was found to be tactically essential as a refreshing vanguard of change. We also tried to get people to respect women and the environment, all of which expanded the technical outreach of our work (Fals Borda, 2000).

These findings helped define what was called “authentic participation”, which is different from the liberal and manipulating versions of popular participation used by governments. In “authentic participation” one aims at shortening the distance between superior and subaltern, between oppressor and oppressed, exploiter and exploited. Furthermore, different types of knowledge are combined or enter into dialogue, for instance, academic erudition and popular knowledge. This, in turn, made it possible to elaborate new tools for research and teaching, such as the intergenerational dialogue, surveys in groups or symposia, cultural maps, the use of archives from memory or family, imputation and triangulation. Thus we recover the popular (unofficial) version of history and strengthen the culture and self-esteem of people at the grassroots.

The horizontal resolution of the tension between subject and object involved a technique of “systematic return” to exchange knowledge and data with non-professional or untrained people, which acknowledged the fundamental role of language within the research and action process. We had to change our jargon, and the complicated way in which we presented the results of our works, so that the students and people with whom we worked

were able to understand us. We then developed differentiated communication according to level of education and/or training of the participants, and for this purpose we incorporated techniques of music, drawing, multimedia and popular theatre (Fals Borda, 1979, pp. 33-56).

3. *World view and orientation*

Our field experience gave us the advantage of making it easier to interact with ordinary people in their own neighbourhoods and communities. Although the processes of change have been slow and multidirectional, they have always been a fascinating, enriching and emancipating experience, an educational experience not only for the community leaders and other people interested, but also for researchers, teachers and external activists. We realised that the scientific spirit can flourish under the most modest and primitive of circumstances, that important work is not necessarily expensive or complicated, nor must it become a monopoly of a class or the academia (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991).

Here the tensions came from the meeting of two worldviews or *Weltanschauungen*: one Eurocentric, of the external activities or academicians, and the other, telluric or regional, which privileged immediacy and everyday life. These were two philosophies of life with value-related guidelines that were often opposed to each other.

Once empathy with people had been developed, it was not very difficult to adapt changes in the foreign worldview. The discovery of a new world in the population bases was sufficient. Unless, as in the old rules, scientific objectivity was imposed.

This caused a change in the orientation of personal conduct among the activists, and the adoption of new social values such as simplicity, democratic and direct participation in the daily routine of community work.

Consequently, we find little space for academic superiority and for scientific self-objectivity. In their place we learned to adopt an empathetic attitude towards others that we call “commitment” or “experience” that reinforce experiences of authentic participation. This is also a lesson that was imparted to us, with their example, by giants of knowledge such as Galileo, who in his

time acknowledged the educational importance of his youthful contact with the fishermen and boat builders in Venice; or such as Humboldt, who adopted the tropical ethos as the center of his life and scientific work. Furthermore, quantum physicists gave us lessons regarding the relativity of matter and energy, which can be extended to the social domain. We recognised that we could not reach truth, as others have wanted to do, but only verisimilitude. And we combined qualitative with quantitative whenever necessary.

These and other examples of scientific humility and local realism, as well as the emancipating collective attitudes determined in the field, helped us redefine action-research and participatory learning as a base of another worldview, as necessary experiences to achieve progress and democracy; as a set of attitudes and values that infuse meaning and realism into technical practice in the field, in the classroom and even in the home. Based on this movement of accumulation of knowledge, PAR could be considered not only as a methodology for research to be taken into account by the institutions, but also as a philosophy of life. Those who practiced it were feeling-thinking people ready to struggle for changes and understand them better: although we would not feel it then, a more satisfactory paradigm was emerging.

About the Colombian experience

A note about the specific development of these works in my country appears necessary *ex-officio*. I will present it synthetically, although there are narcissistic dangers for which you will forgive me.

PAR in Colombia had a demonic midwife: ancestral political Violence that climaxed in the “bogatazo” of 1948. We leftists have blamed the oligarchies for the very bad way in which they handled the problem, permeated by myopic liberal and neoliberal policies that reflect a social class self-centeredness and that have made the situation more complicated and worse. These are 60 years of national suffering that continue with the current government.

Present at the birth of PAR were two tendencies among intellectuals: the belligerent one represented by Camilo Torres, one of our founding fathers, who saw as the only possible way forward in weapons and historical guerrilla

wars; and the other path of civic resistance that was taken by autonomous institutions such as the Rosca Foundation which I chaired, CINEP of the progressive Jesuits, and critical movements of the Freire type, such as FE-CODE (federation of educators).

In this situation, the political and party incidence had to be ubiquitous and strong. Rosca not only innovated in participatory research as described, but it also tried to organise a party and strengthen the extraordinary peasant movement of the ANUC. From the beginning of its work it already sought a path of its own, calling it the “experiential knowledge”, respectful of the cultural and environmental context, in which it was distinguished from the Communist and socialist formulas colonized by Europeans. At Rosca we felt that we had to try and work under our own steam, and that is what we did. However, we suffered the high cost of McCarthyism, both from the right and from the left.

Between these two crossfires, we who continued with PAR sought international support: in the Netherlands, Sweden, the Presbyterian Church of the United States, and we intensified our publications with books and journals that recovered the popular history and the people’s heroes, and fed the anti-elite youth. There were great risks involved and deaths occurred. I myself was saved from some predicaments.

We immediately adopted the technique of immersion into the communities, used by the colleagues who resisted the dictatorship of Pinochet in Chile, with appreciable success. We decided to be prudent, recalling what Jesus Christ once said to his disciples who were discouraged by their lack of efficacy: “Be as pure as doves, but as wise as serpents.” This cryptic figure, from one of the greatest subversives in history, was, for a long time, an emblem for PAR. I think that it still is.

Meanwhile the participatory methodology began to be co-opted in universities, governments and international agencies, and convergence occurred with several disciplines at regional and world congresses, as said. PAR was no longer seen as something bad, and my former students began to occupy certain leading positions at important institutions. Some even became ministers and vice-ministers. Even the current president of the Republic, Alvaro

Uribe, came to participate in the opening ceremony of the world congress of PAR a few months ago.

There emerged political movements that began in workers' unions, such as Frente Social y Politico (Social and Political Front) and adopted practical and ideological principles of PAR. I myself was elected president, and in the political party that followed it, -the Polo Democratico Alternativo (Alternative Democratic Pole) under the presidency of the respected professor and magistrate Carlos Gaviria, I was appointed honorary President. Sometimes I felt alone in a pit of political lions who were more pragmatic than I was. But they put up with my recommendations, which now include advancing to become a real radical democratic party and with an autochthonous socialist horizon, which is not a copy of the failed experiences in other places, but based on the theory of the context, and that will acquire the flavour and consistency of our tropics and original peoples, those from deeper America.

Following in the steps of the Peruvian Marxists, Mariátegui and Argüedas, and inspired by the principles of PAR about the critical recovery of history and culture, we have recommended turning our eyes, respecting and relearning from four peoples that have formed the essence of the Columbian nation. These are: the indigenous peoples, the free blacks, the anti-seigneurial artisans and peasants, and the patriarchs who colonised the agricultural frontier. This is not turning back history or any romantic primitivism. The idea is to recognise and dynamise the underground history of the base peoples, and to project their founding social values into the future. These values are: the solidarity of the indigenous peoples, the freedom of the Palenquero blacks, the dignity of the "comuneros" [rebels] and the autonomy of the colonists. We see that this thesis of action research is not only for Colombia: its elements cover all the way from the Inuits of Canada to the Fuegians of Patagonia. I highlight the case of the Haitians, now forgotten and exploited, who are those that most need to recover their brave and exemplary original history of liberty, the one that opened the doors to our revolutionary créoles seeking independence. Thus all common peoples of the hemisphere could better enter post-modernity and post-development.

In this transition, full of convergences, recoveries and attempts at social reconstruction, once again a powerful political actor is emerging in Colom-

bia, sometimes forgotten, sometimes manipulated by other forces. I refer to the anti-elite youth. Differently from previous generations, today there are youth groups in activity that, by receiving a major legacy of political education, including that of PAR and its worldview, are able to confront the caudillesque, bureaucratic and Eurocentric class. They are doing this with the political philosophy that takes its inspiration from authentic participation. In the Alternative Democratic Pole this anti-elitist young generation is mobilizing around the Huitoto indigenous concept of *Kaziyadu* or Renacer (Rebirth) that highlights the cultural function and horizontal personality of an integral human being.

Finally, it is very likely that without the strategic tensions of action-research, explained previously, we would not have reached this new political development nor matured to challenge decisively the Violence, whose Gorgon head, unfortunately, is still in place. Cutting the head of that hydra is a hard and indispensable goal of the Pole. And there we will continue with PAR, as long as the body can stand it. We are not doing badly. The Alternative Democratic Pole is already the second most important electoral force of Colombia.

Final consideration

Again, I am grateful to Diskin and to LASA for this opportunity to work together for a science that is useful to the peoples. Emphasising the role of the cultural, social and environmental contexts can help focus from a new perspective on the topic of scientific paradigms that is still the next step with PAR, in many people's opinion. This is a challenge for which we count on the assumptions of praxeology, of those of the postmodern and post-developmental philosophers besides the results of the interdisciplinary convergences.

As we take these references and guiding concept of praxis with phronesis into account, we discover an almost virgin vein of a wealth of knowledge regarding the realities of our original peoples, of our deepest roots, fortunately still alive. Let us recall that the paradigms that so far have moulded our professional training are sociocultural constructs originating in Europe.

Today we try to take inspiration from our own surroundings and to construct more flexible paradigms of a holistic and participatory nature. Academic arrogance is an obstacle to achieving these goals; it should be removed from circulation.

Three centuries ago, Juan Bautista Vico delimited, with his critical scalpel, a “new science” for a “new orb”. As that author predicted, this went ahead, with doubtful results. Today there is a parallel challenge to create a new science, responsible, democratic and participatory, to bring order to a world that is overexploited and in crisis, with threats of breakdown from the heavens to the caverns. We have reached the “turning point” of humankind, expressed by Frithof Capra.

One would wish that the contribution of LASA will not be another voice in the desert. Fortunately it articulated that of Martin Diskin. Maybe the “activist researcher” of his will continue to bear fruits. The red clouds of the new horizon are just now beginning to appear. As we say in PAR, now one must struggle to win. Renewing Political proposals thus inspired, such as those of Autochthonous Socialism, are beginning to be known and active in Latin America (Fals Borda, 2007).

May our multiple ancestral deities help us. I believe that this is the wish of many social scientists, like me, committed to work and transform the world for good. This is an infinite and necessary task. I will await you in the unoccupied limbo where I shall probably arrive one of these days, to continue observing together, not without nostalgia, the *Kaziaydu* – Rebirth of this still beautiful blue globe.

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